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US unwavering in Middle East security commitment: Austin

'We're also committed to not allowing Iran to get a nuclear weapon'



MANAMA: Bahrain's Minister for Defense Affairs Abdulla bin Hasan Al-Nuaimi receives the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in Manama. — AFP

MANAMA: The United States warned yesterday it was capable of deploying "overwhelming force" in the Middle East as it faced questions about its willingness to use its military power in the region. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told the Manama Dialogue in Bahrain's capital that all options would be open if diplomacy fails to halt Iran's nuclear program, but he was also forced to rebut claims the US has become reluctant to use force.

The Pentagon chief was asked why Washington did not respond to last month's drone-and-artillery attack on a base used by the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group in Syria. "The United States of America maintains the right to defend itself. And we will defend ourselves and our interests, no matter what, at the time and place of our choosing," he replied.

"And let no country, let no individual be mistaken about that. We are committed to defending ourselves and our interests and

that includes our partners as well," said Austin. "And we're also committed to not allowing Iran to get a nuclear weapon." Iran and world powers are set for talks on November 29 aimed at reviving an accord that placed restrictions on its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. Tehran has always denied it is seeking nuclear weapons.

Austin said Washington's major goal was to strengthen its "unmatched" alliances in the Middle East, but said military force remained an option with tens of thousands of its troops stationed in the region. After ending its 20-year occupation of Afghanistan in August, the US is poised to withdraw its combat troops from Iraq by the end of the year. This month, Iraq's prime minister escaped an assassination attempt two days after security forces clashed with supporters of Iran-backed parties that lost support in recent elections.

Yesterday, Iran said it had seized a foreign boat smuggling diesel in the oil-rich

Gulf. Since February, Iran and Zionist entities have been engaged in a "shadow war" in which vessels linked to each country have come under attack in waters around the Gulf. The US and Zionists accuse Iran of using drones and missiles to destabilize the region.

In brief remarks to the forum, senior Saudi figure Turki bin Faisal Al Saud called for "demonstrative action" in the region, including the "total enforcement" of the arms embargo on Yemen's Iran-supported Houthi rebels, who are fighting a Saudi-led coalition. Austin said that "America's commitment to security in the Middle East is strong and sure." "Ultimately, our mission is to support diplomacy and to deter conflict and to defend the United States and our vital interests," he said.

"If we're forced to turn back aggression, we will win and we will win decisively." Austin's visit comes days before Iran returns to talks with world powers on

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Chronic diseases linked to meat consumption

PARIS: As global trade in red and processed meats has increased, so have chronic diseases associated with meat consumption, a study looking at data from 154 countries found. Researchers focused on illness and death rates from three diseases strongly linked to red and processed meat consumption: colorectal cancer, type-2 diabetes and coronary heart disease.

They drew on meat import and export figures from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to find out where in the world red and processed meats had become more available. They then checked these findings against health data from the Global Burden of Disease project. "The increased intake of red and processed meat products via trade caused the abrupt increase of diet-related non-communicable diseases," the study published in the British Medical Journal concluded.

The adverse effects of a diet high in red and processed meats is well known. But the international trade of these products also has far-reaching impacts on the climate, through greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity loss, through shrinking habitat, the study noted. "Few international initiatives and national guidelines for sustainable diets explicitly address the spillover impacts of the meat trade across countries," they said. They calculated a worldwide increase in related deaths of nearly 75 percent between 1993 and 2018, with major variations by geographical region.

While they estimated a 55 percent rise in related deaths in developed countries, the rate of increase in developing countries was more than double: 157 percent. "These higher rates are because many developing countries around the world exponentially relied on red and processed meat imports to meet their increased meat demands under rapid urbanization and income growth," the study says. Over the years covered by the study, developing countries expanded imports while rich ones expanded exports, the findings showed.

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World's first electric cargo ship launched

OSLO: Zero emissions and, soon, zero crew: the world's first fully electric autonomous cargo vessel was unveiled in Norway, a small but promising step toward reducing the maritime industry's climate footprint. By shipping up to 120 containers of fertilizer from a plant in the southeastern town of Porsgrunn to the Brevik port a dozen kilometers away, the much-delayed Yara Birkeland, shown off to the media, will eliminate the need for around 40,000 truck jour-

neys a year that are now fuelled by polluting diesel.

"Of course, there have been difficulties and setbacks," said Svein Tore Holsether, chief executive of Norwegian fertilizer giant Yara. "But then it feels even more rewarding to stand here today in front of this ship and see that we were able to do it," he said, with the sleek blue-and-white vessel moored behind him in an Oslo dock, where it had been sailed for the event. The 80-metre, 3,200-deadweight ton ship will soon begin two years of working trials during which it will be fine-tuned to learn to maneuver on its own.

The wheelhouse could disappear altogether in "three, four or five years", said Holsether, once the vessel makes

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OSLO: The world's first self-propelled, electric container ship MV Yara Birkeland is moored at Langkaia in Oslo, on November 19, 2021. — AFP

Biden declared healthy and 'fit' for presidency

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden got a clean bill of health from the White House doctor on Friday after undergoing an extensive, routine check-up during which his powers were briefly transferred to Vice President Kamala Harris. "The President remains a healthy, vigorous, 79-year-old male, who is fit to successfully execute the duties of the

Presidency, to include those as Chief Executive, Head of State and Commander in Chief," Kevin O'Connor, the White House physician, wrote.

The detailed report said that Biden did have "perceptibly stiffer and less fluid" motion while walking than a year ago, and suffered "increasing frequency and severity of 'throat clearing' and coughing during public speaking engagements." However, these two symptoms were not considered of immediate concern and did not appear to result from serious conditions, O'Connor's letter said.

On a raft of tests, Biden came out with high marks. He has "no signs of heart failure," "no dental issues," has no "suspicions for skin cancer," and his

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MARYLAND: US President Joe Biden waves after getting a medical check up as he departs Walter Reed Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland on November 19, 2021. — AFP

Qatar prepares to host WCup

DOHA: Exactly one year before it hosts the football World Cup, Doha is criss-crossed with trenches and snarled with traffic as officials race to install a vital feature - adequate drainage. Rainstorms are rare but paralyzing in the Qatari capital, often causing flooding that leads to gridlock. With 1.2 million fans expected next year, such disruption is to be avoided at all costs.

For taxi driver Mohamed, squeezing past construction sites in the

downtown West Bay business district, the roadworks are a headache that he and his passengers could do without. "They weren't thinking 20 years ago when they did this (drainage system)," he said. "Customers don't like waiting." Cruising down the corniche, an arcing highway with West Bay views, is usually a Doha highlight but now, with excavations and gaggles of workmen, the city's main artery is strangled.

Journey times have multiplied and in the evening rush-hour, cars sit in a giant traffic jam. Frustrations have bubbled over into rare criticism of officials on social media.

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DOHA: Photo shows construction workers at Qatar's Lusail Stadium, one of the Qatar's 2022 World Cup stadiums, around 20 kilometers north of the capital Doha. — AFP